

The Impact of Mobility on Student Performance and Teacher Practice

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Abstract: This article examines the effects that high mobility can have on highly mobile students, non-mobile students, teachers, and schools, with particular focus on the effect of high mobility on academic achievement. A mixed-methods study with data collected from public schools in Nebraska during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 school years finds that highly mobile students scored lower on criterion-referenced assessments than their non-highly mobile peers. The article also provides recommendations of strategies that can be implemented to help address mobility-related issues based on data from qualitative interviews. These strategies are grouped into categories of transition programs, administrative procedures, classroom strategies, and support for teachers.

Introduction

Between 2006 and 2007, 14% of all school-aged children in the United States changed their residence (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2009). According to the 2004 Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the U.S. Census, 15 to 20% of all school-aged children moved in 2003 (EPE Research Center, 2004). In a study conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 1998 Math Assessment, “34% of 4th graders, 21% of 8th graders, and 10% of 12th graders changed schools at least once in the previous two years” (Rumberger, 2003, p. 6-7). Student mobility, defined as a “non-promotional school change” (Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy, 1999, p. vi), affects many students and classrooms each year. Often, this impact is negative—for mobile students, non-mobile students, teachers, and schools. At highest risk for failure are the highly mobile students themselves. The U.S. Government Accounting Office reveals that students “who change schools more than three times before eighth grade are at least four times more likely to drop out of school” (Paik & Phillips, 2002, p. 7). The problems that correlate with high mobility have forced schools to take steps to alleviate the situation.

Effects of Student Mobility

Much of the research conducted on mobility and achievement concludes that mobility is a large threat to academic achievement and the school environment (Biernat & Jax, 2000; Kaase & Dulaney, 2005; Reynolds, Chen, & Herbers, 2009). Indeed, some research reports testify that an achievement gap between mobile and non-mobile students is irreparable (Texas Education Agency, 1997). Forty-one percent of highly mobile students are low achievers, compared with 26% of non-highly

mobile students (Paik & Phillips, 2002). Mobility also contributes to the likelihood of a student dropping out (EPE Research Center, 2004; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Osher, Morrison, & Bailey, 2003; Reynolds et al., 2009). In one study, 13 of 158 high school dropouts cited frequent moves as their reason for dropping out (Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2009). One 22-year-old who had moved from out of state explained, “I was an outsider, I didn’t fit in. I lost credit moving in from out of state. I missed all of my friends and I just didn’t want to go. I was so far behind and had lots of problems.” A 17-year-old stated, “Too far behind and not financially stable enough to stay in one school, so it was harder to learn having to move so much” (pp. 44, 48). Another study cited transfer to a new school as a warning sign that a student could disengage and eventually drop out (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). The more frequent changes to schools, the greater the threat to academic achievement. High mobility can also have a negative impact on classrooms and schools. Mobility is “a ‘chaos’ factor that impacts classroom learning activities, teacher morale and administrative burdens” (Rumberger, 2003, p. 11). A lack of funding and the pressure of academic performance measures compound the problem for administrators.

It is difficult to definitively conclude that a high level of mobility directly causes academic underachievement. Some studies argue that highly mobile students fail academically because of other factors, such as IQ, socioeconomic status, or minority status (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1996). Other studies conclude that mobile students’ underperformance was caused by preexisting underachievement (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000; Temple & Reynolds, 1999). However, Osher et al. (2003) determined that mobility is “likely to have a negative impact on student development.”

Highly Mobile Students

Current research has found that “students can suffer psychologically, socially, and academically from mobility” (Rumberger, 2003, p. 8). Learning gaps not only make achievement in a new classroom more difficult, but can also reduce student motivation. Sanderson (2003a) reports that mobility students are largely disengaged, with little or no vested interest in the school or the educational process. Mobile students make academic progress slower and lose knowledge quicker than their non-mobile peers (Mao, Whitsett, & Mellor, 1998; Texas Education Agency, 1997). Studies have also revealed that students are highly unlikely to compensate for their knowledge gap because their knowledge deficiency increases every consecutive year (Reynolds, 1991). Mobile students must also adjust to new classmates in a new social environment (Rumberger, 2003).

Classrooms

Research indicates that teachers perceive mobility as a major barrier that prevents students from succeeding. Teachers in highly mobile classes blamed mobility for their inability to effectively preserve the learning environment and deliver quality instruction (Bruno & Isken, 1996; Kerbow, 1996; Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990; Sanderson, 2003a). Often, teachers demonstrate frustration and hopelessness while teaching mobile students. They feel mobile students display negative attitudes and bad behavior (Sanderson, 2003a), and they say there are “no benefits of working with children who move” (Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990, p. 185). Studies have found that teachers rarely know in advance how many new students will enter their classrooms during a school year and how many more will exit before the last day of school (Bruno & Isken, 1996; Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990). Such unexpected classroom changes make it difficult for teachers to adjust and deliver quality instruction. This leads to high mobility “adversely impact[ing] non-mobile students” (Rumberger, 2003, p. 11) because of the amount of time spent reviewing old material in class. In a California study, test scores of non-mobile students were significantly lower in high schools with high student mobility rates (Rumberger et al., 1999). Offenber (2004) theorized that a school’s poor or positive performance might be attributable to the school’s high or low mobility rate, and not to the school’s characteristics (e.g., highly qualified teachers, well-developed teaching and learning programs, school policies, etc.), indicating that mobility may be a decisive factor in overall school performance.

The Problem

Student mobility is a nationwide phenomenon, but there is a perception that student mobility is more likely to impact urban schools in the United States. However, according to the U.S. Government Accounting Office, students in rural areas have an approximate mobility rate of 15 %—comparable to the national average (Reynolds, et al., 2009). Mobility in rural areas may be linked to the strong correlation between poverty and the risk of academic failure, as well as the strong correlation between poverty and frequent mobility (Wright, 1999). An examination of schools participating in Nebraska’s Reading First initiative found that low-income students were 80 % more likely to be mobile than their peers (Trainin, 2005). When poor families move, it

is often out of necessity, and can be more traumatic for children (Lesisko & Wright, 2009). In 2007, the event dropout rate of students in low-income families was 10 times greater than the event dropout rate of students in high-income families (Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009). Recent reports have found that “nearly half a million children in the rural Midwest are living in poverty, and thousands more are living just above the poverty line,” leading to the conclusion that “the risk of frequent mobility and academic failure is heightened” (Paik & Phillips, 2002, p. 6).

The average rates of student mobility in Nebraska public schools have slowly decreased from 13.82 % in 2004-2005 to 12.02 % in 2008-2009 (Nebraska Department of Education, 2009). However, a large number of Nebraska schools report mobility at a higher percentage than the state average. For example, some rural schools in Nebraska have a mobility rate as high as 43.10 % (Nebraska Department of Education, 2009).

This mixed-methods research study was aimed at examining the impact of student mobility on student performance and teacher practice in the state of Nebraska. Quantitative data were gathered during the 2007-2008 school year, and qualitative data were gathered during the 2008-2009 school year.

Methodology

Quantitative data were gathered by the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) and provided to the researchers for this study. Data from 212 out of 254 school districts in Nebraska were used. Additionally, criterion-referenced individual student data were aggregated statewide and reported for fourth, eighth, and eleventh grades for the first time in 2008. Qualitative data were collected through interviews conducted at schools with high mobility rates and high student performance, and at schools with high mobility and low student performance. The purpose of these selections was to gain information on what schools are doing to support highly mobile students. Classroom teachers, specialized teachers, and administrators were interviewed.

Results

Highly Mobile vs. Non-Highly Mobile Student Achievement

The quantitative portion of this study found that high mobility students in Nebraska demonstrated a persistent pattern of lower achievement scores on criterion-referenced assessments versus their non-highly mobile classmates. These findings corresponded to research conclusions that mobility is associated with lower achievement.

As shown in Table 1, the fourth-grade criterion-referenced assessment in math showed the largest percentage of highly mobile students scoring proficient or better, at 90 %. On this test, 95 % of non-highly mobile students scored proficient or better, and the state average was 94 %. The eighth-grade science test showed the smallest percentage of highly mobile students scoring proficient or better, at 67 %. By contrast, 88 % of non-highly mobile students scored proficient or better on this test, while the state average was 86 %. This was also the largest discrepancy between highly mobile and non-highly mobile students.

The data results indicate that a larger percentage of non-highly mobile students scored proficient or better on all the locally defined

Table 1

Students Scoring Proficient or Better on Criterion-Referenced Assessments

Criterion-Referenced Assessment	Grade Level	Total Students Scoring Proficient or Better (%)	Non-Highly Mobile Students Scoring Proficient or Better (%)	Highly Mobile Students Scoring Proficient or Better (%)
Reading	4th	91	94	86
	8th	92	94	79
	11th	89	92	76
Math	4th	94	95	90
	8th	90	92	76
	11th	86	89	72
Science	4th	88	89	79
	8th	86	88	67
	11th	83	87	70
Writing	4th	91	91	83
	8th	93	94	84
	11th	94	95	85

criterion-referenced assessments in 2007-2008 compared to their highly mobile peers. As shown in Figure 1, eighth- and eleventh-grade highly mobile students in Nebraska performed on average 10 to 15 percentile points below their non-highly mobile peers statewide in Reading, Math, Science and Writing assessments. Fourth-grade highly mobile students scored an average of 5-10 percentile points below their non-highly mobile peers in these assessments.

Qualitative results confirmed the academic difficulties that can face highly mobile students. One seventh/eighth grade math teacher stated, "I get frustrated with it. I see kids that aren't getting what they need to get. They have [attended] 6 different schools and they're in the 7th grade, and I feel like I'm always trying to help that child play catch up. I would like to think that I was helping them catch up, but I don't feel very successful at times." A special education teacher noted

that language barriers can intensify the problem: "A lot of them are shy and the language is hard for them [to use] to communicate what they're thinking."

It is important to note that the presence of other moderating factors in this study, such as high ELL populations and high Free/Reduced Lunch rates, made it impossible to prove a causal relationship between high mobility and low achievement. However, researchers noted that when districts provided more support services to account for high mobility, all students benefited. Additionally, a middle school principal acknowledged, "There's a lot of factors outside of the school that also impact the students and we just have to provide a safe and secure environment."

Addressing Mobility Issues

In order to address the achievement gap between highly mobile and non-highly mobile students, Nebraska schools implemented a variety of strategies. Schools that were successful in dealing with mobility had: (a) solid transition programs for mobile students, (b) administrative procedures that increased the overall quality of the school, (c) flexible classroom strategies, and (d) collaborative support and effective communication.

Transition Programs

Many schools that had high mobility rates also had transition programs in place in order to better support highly mobile students. A principal shared one such transition procedure: "The counselor interviews the student and the parents about their school and past experiences." Common steps in these transition programs included (a) obtaining records, (b) connecting the student to a new environment, and (c) connecting the student to peers.

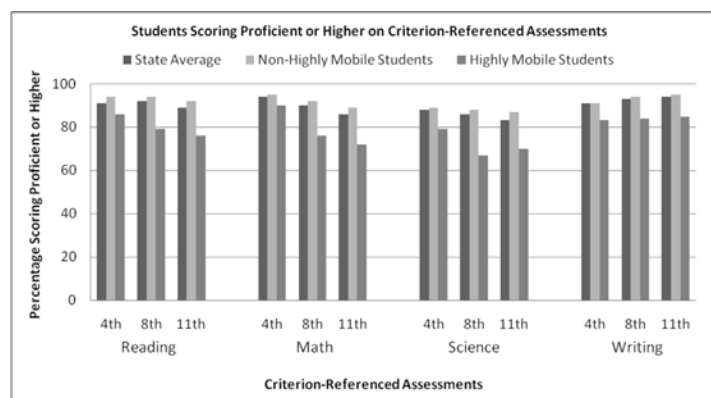


Figure 1. Students scoring proficient or better on criterion-referenced assessments.

Obtaining Records

An eighth grade math teacher explained that “if a student is gone for an extended amount of time,” then the school had to identify what skills, knowledge and information the student possesses and what academic gaps exist. This initial step in a mobile student’s transition consumed a great deal of the school’s energy. One principal shared, “We’re spending a lot of time trying to find out where they are and what we need to give the student to get them caught up to where they need to be.” Therefore, local transitions definitely had their advantages, as noted by a principal: “If they’re from inside the district it’s easier to find out where they are and if it’s from outside the district there has to be many phone calls to find out what’s been done and what hasn’t been done.” Missing information and miscommunication could result in students being placed “in programs for the gifted and talented or in remedial classes when neither is appropriate” (Biernat & Jax, 2000). Therefore, a middle school principal suggested, “A centralized records system for the state would be a huge help.” Such a system was recently implemented in Nebraska by the Nebraska Department of Education.

The challenge is greater when mobile students were also special education students. Personnel from one school shared that they often had to wait for special education placement due to the need for access to records, “In our district, we have access to information; if they come from someplace else we don’t really have access, we have to wait for their records to come.”

Often times they’re coming with no grades or records, [so we are] just trying to get a feel if there is any kind of special needs. If they indicate anything that might be special needs, then we do a temporary placement, so the student can receive special education services until we actually get the paperwork, which can be a month away. We don’t really know. (Middle School Principal)

Connecting the Student to a New Environment

A study by Fisher, Matthews, Stafford, Nakagawa, and Durante (2002) found that 89% of the participants believed that transition programs needed to be focused on providing a consistent but caring educational environment, as these traits were essential for establishing quality relationships with students. An eighth grade math teacher explained, “Because once they’re comfortable with that, you’re going to be able to make that next step to the academic piece.” Other suggestions were made to encourage the new student to see the counselor or principal, or to have a translator on hand, depending on the new student’s language of origin. One middle school math teacher shared, “When trying to help them transition, we put together a packet. They can just look at this packet and it tells them what each one of their core classes or expectations are.”

Connecting the Student to Peers

Reynolds et al. (2009) reported that mobile students’ weaker peer relationships increase their risk for underachievement. A special education/language arts teacher explained the challenges faced by a mobile student in a new environment: “They’ve got to make friends, they’ve got to get online with what we’re learning. It’s not easy for those students coming here. It’s not like this just comes easy for

the kids.” One common method used to help a new student adjust involved helping them make connections with their peers. An eighth grade math teacher described the method their school called “first friends” to help new students adjust:

On the first morning that they’re here, the counselors pick students that they know are pretty friendly and outgoing [to] show them around the school, take them to their teachers and get them to their lockers, make sure they can do the combinations.

Administrative Procedures

According to Rumburger (2003), the most effective strategy to reduce mobility is to increase the overall quality of the school. A variety of initiatives were introduced at the schoolwide level throughout the state to diminish the negative impact of student mobility and at the same time improve the entire school. They included (a) counselor support, (b) social support, (c) teaching teams, and (d) extra programming.

Counselor Support

Counselors often play instrumental roles in helping ease transitions. They team new students up with other students, follow up on the new student’s academic history, and work with teachers to determine in which class to place the student. A seventh/eighth-grade math teacher described the role of counselors in helping new students: “The counselor will take a student into their team area and then once they give them a tour of the building, they will walk the schedule with them and show them exactly where they are to enter each day and where everything is that they have to know.” Counselors could also help to determine the appropriate class for the student:

The counselor is very involved in pairing the student up with buddies and working with the teachers on getting the student in the right classes and looking at what’s the best fit. I mean [for example], “This kid has already missed four weeks, is this a better class to go into, instead of that class?” “What classes are going to be easier for the student to adapt to and not be behind?” Those decisions are made everyday just because that’s the way it is in our building. (Middle School Principal)

Social Support

Successful schools also put an emphasis on healthy socialization. As an eighth grade math teacher stated, “I don’t want them to feel they’re so different from everybody else.” This goal was applicable for all students, as described by this high school principal:

I wanted the students to develop a sense of belonging and so whether it’s called home rooms or learning communities, we have developed that and it is a check and balance of attendance and academics. They can go in and build a relationship with one staff member. Staff members can address their downfall in academics with them as they meet once a week for a full period. That has been quite favorable. (High School Principal)

Ideally, administrative teams sought to develop a climate in their schools similar to the one featured in this middle school principal's school: "I see kids in our school being very accepting, I really do, and I think it's because it's just so much a part of a routine."

Teaching Teams

Teaching teams met in order to discuss problems and solutions on a variety of issues—one of which can be mobility. Teachers helped each other ensure that mobile students are at grade level and share past experiences. A seventh/eighth-grade math teacher shared, "I could call on another teacher and say, 'In this math class I have a new kid. They're working on this, they're not understanding it, what have you done in the past?'" A middle school principal explained the advantages of teaching teams: "I think that in our school we're so lucky to have the teaming approach that teachers can share those stresses together and share their concerns but then also work together on how to resolve it."

We [the grade level team] try to brainstorm what we see them doing, their patterns, or if they miss school a lot or if they are sick a lot. Then we try to work with those issues, get them here, work one on one with them, provide peer tutoring and as much help and assistance as we can. (Sixth-Grade Math Teacher)

Extra Programming

Sometimes the best way to help a mobile student catch up involved extra programming (ex., ELL programs, Individual Education Plans). An eighth-grade math teacher suggested, "After school study sessions, maybe lunchtime study sessions so that we can reach as many students as possible." This may be a matter of simply finding a convenient time for teachers and students. One special education/resource teacher explained, "There are a lot of us here at 6:30 and there are a lot of students waiting outside to get in at 6:30. The access works both ways." Some educators whose schools have already implemented extra programming reported positive results. A middle school principal shared, "At least half of the kids [in extra classes] have already gotten to the [goal] level and are ready to go back to their regular classrooms." Extra programming was also directed at teachers who needed to learn skills for dealing with mobility in their classrooms:

Mobility is probably the biggest issue that we do deal with. The school district does a very good job letting us work together and giving us the opportunity to give each other feedback and ideas on how to deal with mobility. We have the opportunity to access our ESU, to go to workshops or seminars on how to deal with mobility. (Middle School Math Teacher)

Classroom Strategies

Classrooms with highly mobile students could sometimes suffer due to the need to review and reteach material. A high school principal explained, "With high mobility, the amount of material that is presented even to our best students has been minimized. They [mobile students] are playing so much catch up every day that your non-mobile students are not challenged to the degree that they

should be." This potentially led to situations where neither highly mobile nor non-highly mobile students achieve academically. However, Rumberger (2003) indicated that "schools can undertake some specific strategies to help address problems associated with mobility" (p. 15). Principals and teachers provided the researchers with insight into some of the strategies that are being used in Nebraska. These strategies included (a) building classroom community, (b) placing mobile students within the classroom, (c) teacher flexibility, and (d) accommodation of students' home lives.

Building Classroom Community

A healthy and supportive classroom community ensured that a new student will be comfortable and more able to succeed. It also guaranteed that the new student will have multiple sources of support in the classroom. In a classroom with highly mobile new students, however, this can be a tricky process. An eighth-grade math teacher stated that "it's a challenge to get the students a rapport with the other students in the classroom." In order to develop an inclusive classroom community, one seventh/eighth-grade math teacher used "a buddy system." An eighth-grade math teacher elaborated on this cooperative method: "We're almost always in groups and [students] feel a little more comfortable saying [to the new student], 'she said to get this out,' 'that's what she means,' or if there is something that I forgot to explain, they lean over and do it for me." Classroom communities benefited the entire classroom—mobile and non-mobile students alike.

It's all about relationships; developing personal relationships with them. The community building that I do at the beginning of the year, and knowing that they have a comfort level with me, that they can come in and talk to me whenever they want. (Sixth-Grade Math Teacher)

Placing Mobile Students Within the Classroom

Even after a mobile student was assigned to a class, the teacher had to place the new student within the classroom at an appropriate level. Often, this had to be accomplished quickly and without the help of standard classroom assessments. A middle school principal shared the use of "a short reading assessment," while an eighth grade math teacher stated that "I just get out a book and I point some things out and see if they look familiar." When the student moved within the same district, however, this process was simplified. A seventh/eighth-grade teacher explained that in this situation, "criterion-referenced assessments that they've taken in previous schools transfer over into my class."

When the kids come in, I have them fill out a little circle for me [about] where they've been, what they remember talking about previously. I try to pull the kid in after school right away for a couple of days, just to see where they've been. (Seventh/Eighth-Grade Math Teacher)

Teacher Flexibility

Teachers needed to be flexible in teaching mobile students. A special education teacher explained: "You've got new people coming

in. What is that person's learning style? How can they learn best? That also impacts how a teacher can teach." This required teachers to be imaginative and brainstorm new ways of teaching and learning. A sixth-grade math teacher offered some suggestions for teachers with mobile students: "You have to be constantly monitoring their progress and different ways to teach them. For example, think of different words, different ways, repetition."

I have to be flexible, I have to be able to work with the student. I pop to the side and say, "Do you know where you are at?" If it's no, then I need to start going through my resources and say, "What are we going to do to either (a) get this student caught up, or (b) look at the other services that we could get for this student." (Eighth-Grade Math Teacher)

Accommodation of Students' Home Lives

In successful schools, teachers and staff demonstrated empathy for mobile students' families who are often in difficult situations. A special education/resource teacher explained, "A lot of my students' parents are not at home at night because they're working another job. So we try to do everything in my classroom. I don't send homework home. If they have any questions they can come to me." This helped to reduce the students' stress. A special education teacher shared that an after-school tutoring program was one way to accommodate students' home lives: "The parent just has to sign a permission slip."

I don't expect the parents to sit down and do homework with the kids because that's just not possible for most parents. Things are taught so much differently now than when they were in school. But I expect them to get the kids here and if they have to stay after school, enforce that they stay after school. (Special Education/Resource Teacher)

Support for Teachers

In addition to these classroom strategies, teachers with mobile students in their classes had to review material often (Sanderson, 2003b). This could compel teachers to devote attention to remedial work rather than new lessons (Stover, 2000). Each move to and from the classroom disrupts the ebb and flow of classroom routines. Thus teachers of mobile students often needed support from their colleagues and their administration, as well as additional classroom resources. A seventh/eighth-grade special education teacher stated, "It's a little bit stressful, but you know, you just kind of do what you've got to do."

They keep me on my toes. I have to continuously revise things that I'm doing. I include a lot of review in my lessons daily. Constant revision of my lesson plans. When I find out what they haven't had [something] or what they're not very good at, then I have to include that for everybody in my lesson, rather than single them out. (Eighth-Grade Math/Algebra Teacher)

Staff Collaboration

Paraprofessionals and special education teachers could help classroom teachers with mobile students in the classroom. A special education teacher explained, "Since there's two of us, the teacher would probably be giving instructions to the kids who already have the system down. I'd probably go over and help the new person and explain what the teachers saying." Teachers also sought advice and support from other classroom teachers, as one seventh/eighth grade math teacher described, "I have the assistance of other teachers, math department-wise, even nondepartmentalized on my teams. We often talk about our kids who are new to our teams and discuss what's working with them and what's not working with them." Co-teaching is another option available to teachers. A special education language arts teacher explained, "I'm lucky enough to work with two co-teachers who are very open to me being out of the classroom because I have to work with another student."

Conclusion

This study determined that mobility has a negative correlation with student achievement. In examining student performance results for the state of Nebraska, high mobility was found to correlate with lower test scores in reading, math, science, and writing, particularly in the eighth and eleventh grades. It is also clear that mobility is a problem for both urban and rural schools. A principal in Nebraska stated, "I don't care if it's in the city or wherever it is. With high mobility students, teachers have to start back at square one depending on the needs of the student. It does hinder performance!" Interviews confirmed that non-mobile students, teachers, and schools as a whole are also impeded by high mobility. A middle school principal pointed out perhaps the greatest challenge in dealing with high mobility: "The frustration is we'll barely get this student right where they need to be in school, [and] that student may move again."

At the same time, educators understood that mobility was a challenge they needed to embrace. A middle school math teacher explained:

It's a big problem, but you can overcome that. They're not any different than any other student; they're just as deserving of an education. But it is very challenging and I think as educators we just need to understand that. It's not their fault that they're going from district to district to district. It's a cultural issue for some, it's an economic issue for some, and as educators we just need to do the best we can.

This study also found that Nebraska schools were employing diverse strategies—ranging from administrative procedures to classroom instruction—to address the academic and social gaps caused by mobility. With the help of a flexible approach and innovative thinking, schools were able to ensure that all of their students are able to achieve.

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